

## The Tipping Point

### *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*

**"tipping point,"** noun. *In epidemiology, the concept that small changes will have little or no effect on a system until a critical mass is reached. Then a further small change "tips" the system and a large effect is observed.* (Merriam Webster Dictionary)

*The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell is a book about change and an examination of social epidemics, chock full of counterintuitive yet compelling and sensible ideas. Gladwell, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, has studied trends for years. According to Gladwell, "the Tipping Point is that magic moment when an idea, trend or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips and spreads like wildfire." It's the moment when the straw breaks the camel's back.

Very minor adjustments can cause dramatic sudden explosive shifts. While primarily utilized as a concept in population health, the idea of epidemics and tipping points can be useful when tracking seemingly sudden social change. A simple change in an immediate environment can cause group behavior to tip in a desirable – or undesirable -- direction. One broken window in a neighborhood can have no effect. A dozen broken windows suggest the neighborhood is on the skids; people move out and property values start to drop. Research in marketing trends shows that fads and trends are contagious and that little causes can have remarkable effects.

Social epidemics are driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people. As in population health epidemics, social epidemics follow geometric progression. They are nonlinear and thus difficult to track by the average person.

Why is it some ideas tip and other's do not? "The success of any type of social epidemic is heavily dependent upon the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts, termed by Gladwell as **"The Law of the Few."** *The Tipping Point* defines three distinct personality types, folks who are natural pollinators of new ideas and trends. People whom, by their very existence create the phenomenon of a tipping point by simple word of mouth. They are often the coolest of the cool...

**Connectors:** People who "occupy many different worlds, subcultures and niches," says Malcolm, are linked by "weak ties" to acquaintances in multiple areas. They have a special gift of bringing the world together. The strength of this weak tie theory, albeit a paradox is that it allows a connector to develop lots of surface friendships and social acquaintances which, when linked together, form an even stronger bond. By having a foot in several arenas, Connectors may not know everything about a subject, but you can bet that they know someone who does. Connectors are not necessarily interested in deep relationships with scores of individuals; instead they value and find pleasure in casual meetings and seem to have an instinct that helps them relate to the people they meet. Their mere presence makes an idea contagious. Noted in the book is the classic example of

Paul Revere's Ride. Being a natural connector, Revere was successful because he was actively involved in the community and gregarious. He became, according to Gladwell, "...an unofficial clearinghouse for anti-British forces," and therefore, the perfect messenger. " Word of mouth happens when a Connector starts talking.

Revere was also a **Maven**. Rooted in Yiddish, a Maven is one who accumulates knowledge, a database if you will. Gladwell relates, "What sets a maven apart, though, is not so much what they know but how they pass it along. The fact that Mavens want to help, for no other reason than because they like to help, turns out to be an awfully effective way of getting someone's attention....they are information brokers." Mavens read *Consumer Reports*, are tuned into the hottest trends, best restaurants and latest fashion crazes. Their expertise spans many genres. A maven is a trivia buff, times ten!

A select group of individuals have skills to persuade us even when we believe we cannot be convinced. The instinctive ability a salesman possesses cannot be resisted. **Salesmen**, the third type who help launch social epidemics, are "senders" who are physiologically different than others. While most are well versed in the closing of the deal, many salesmen personalities are naturally expressive and possess an irresistibly contagious essence. Salesmen often precipitate a tipping point by their enthusiastic presentation.

These three personalities disproportionately affect epidemics in various social ways. But they are of no use without a good message. The content of what they are selling is paramount. Their message must be memorable. Their message must be "sticky." An epidemic may tip due to *its* "**stickiness**" factor. This second agent of change can force equilibrium upset by causing an idea to "stick" in the minds of consumers. To reinforce an old advertising maxim, that an ad must be seen at least six times before anyone will remember it, the stickiness factor thrives on clever redundancy. Figuring out the demographics and overall conception of the message presented is an age-old marketing dilemma. Throughout the book, Gladwell cites examples of the stickiness factor; in particular, interesting examples of the stickiest of children's television programming, Blues Clues, and its predecessor, Sesame Street. More often than not, researchers make changes to tweak ideas and these minute changes create an epidemic avalanche. By tinkering with presentation, repetition and demographic profiles, the stickiness factor adheres in our mind's eye.

**The Power of Context** encompasses the principle of epidemic transmission. "Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur," writes Gladwell. An epidemic can be launched or reversed, tipped, by tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment. An example is the cleanup of graffiti in the New York City subway system. Police cracked down on graffiti and fare jumpers, even though these crimes seemed trivial. By cleaning up the immediate environment of the subway rider, other more serious crimes began to fall. Writes Gladwell, "Our inner states are the result of our outer circumstances." Specific overpowering situations have the ability to overwhelm our inherent

predispositions. Much of criminal activity is directly related to the condition of the surroundings and environment.

Another factor in reference to The Power of Context is that we are all susceptible to peer and social pressure. "The spread of any new and contagious ideology also has a lot to do with the skillful use of group power, " notes Gladwell. Small grassroots efforts headed by close-knit groups can powerfully magnify the potential of an idea or message in epidemic proportions.

Gladwell touches on **Channel Capacity**, a concept in cognitive psychology, which refers to the amount of space in our brains for certain types of information. We seem to possess the capability to have relationships with up to 150 people. Groups larger than the "magic number" seem to lose camaraderie and have a tendency to split and form clans. The theory also substantiates a transactive memory system, which functions as a joint memory system when people know each other well enough.

Groups who initiate change are defined as **Innovators** and **Early Adopters**. These visionaries, by and large, are willing to take enormous risks. By contrast, the **Early Majority**, mostly represented by big companies, is polar opposites of the Early Adopters. Translators make it possible for innovations to overcome the opposition of the high risk/low risk groups. Innovators try something new, then a Maven, Connector or Salesman copies it and adopts it, thus spreading the trend.

The theory of a tipping point requires that we reframe the way we think about the world and accept that the world does not always "accord with our intuition," Gladwell argues. "What must underlie successful epidemics, in the end, is a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus." While this is contradictory to some of the most basic assumptions we possess, tipping points are reaffirmations of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action." Gladwell points out that the world around us may seem like "...an immovable, implacable place. With the slightest push, in just the right place, it can be tipped."

--By Julie Raney